



# JAN-KEN-PON!

a Saioumota zine



# Thank you!

Fan content, be it art, writing, or something else, made for no reason other than to share it with those who share your passion, is one of the purest forms of love towards the characters there is, and this zine is no exception. Saiousmota and the intricate bonds they share have been an absolute highlight of Danganronpa, and this zine is a tribute to that, made possible all thanks to the dedicated effort of our 33 wonderful contributors. We would like to thank each and every one of them for the work they put in, the enthusiasm they brought to the team, and the amazing results they created. This zine wouldn't have been possible without them, or the readers who have been following the project since its beginning. Thank you all for your support, and we hope you enjoy Jan-Ken-Pon!

From,  
Jan-Ken-Pon! Mods

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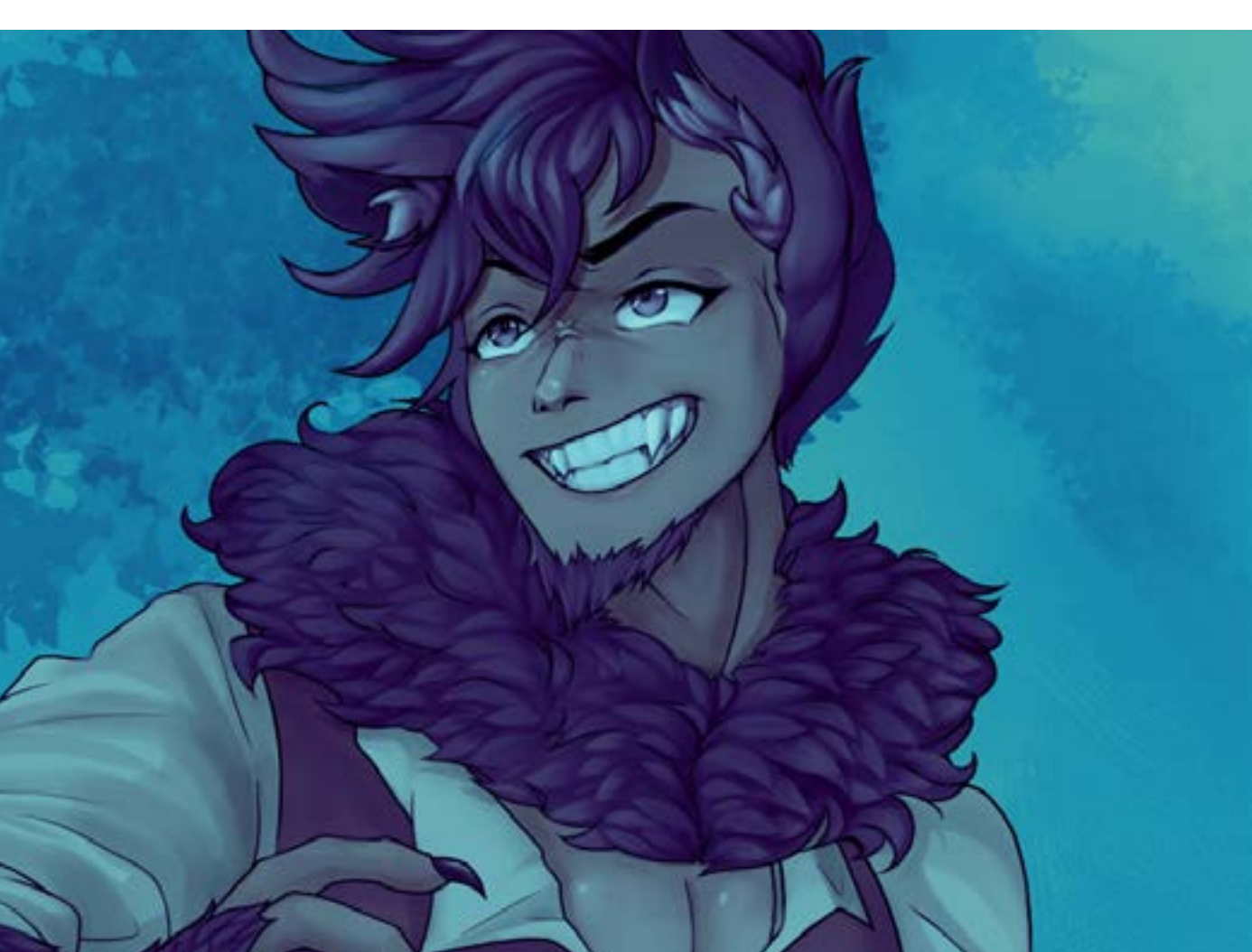
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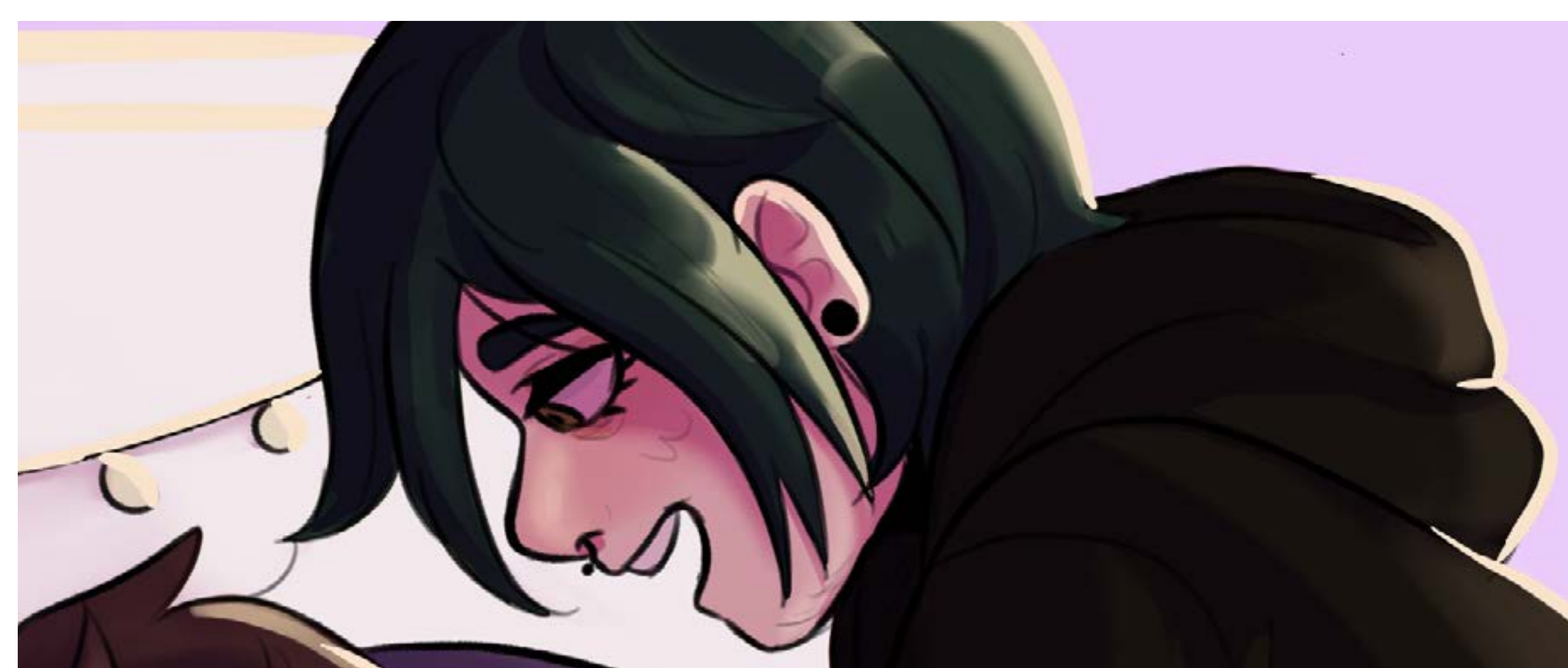
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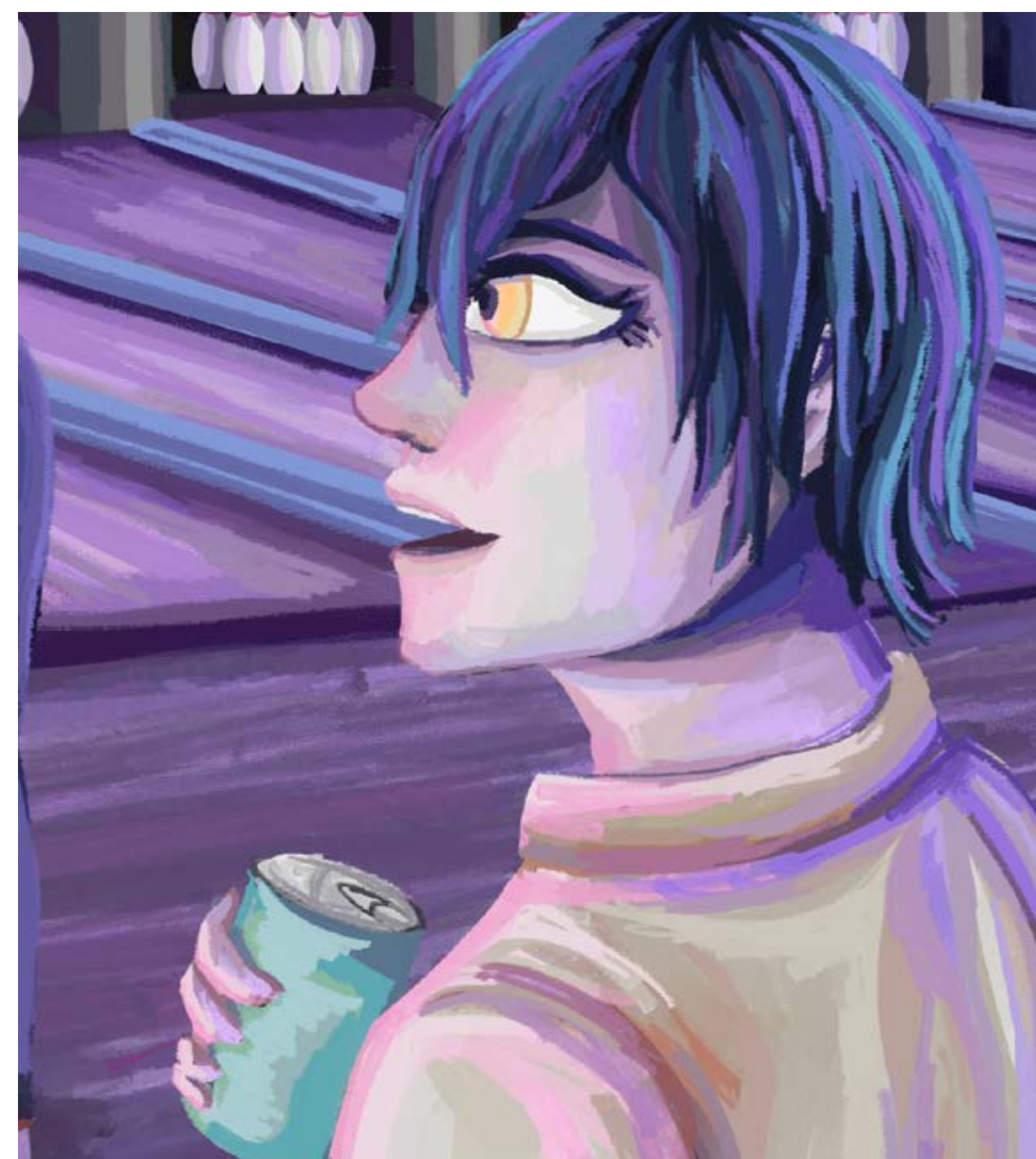
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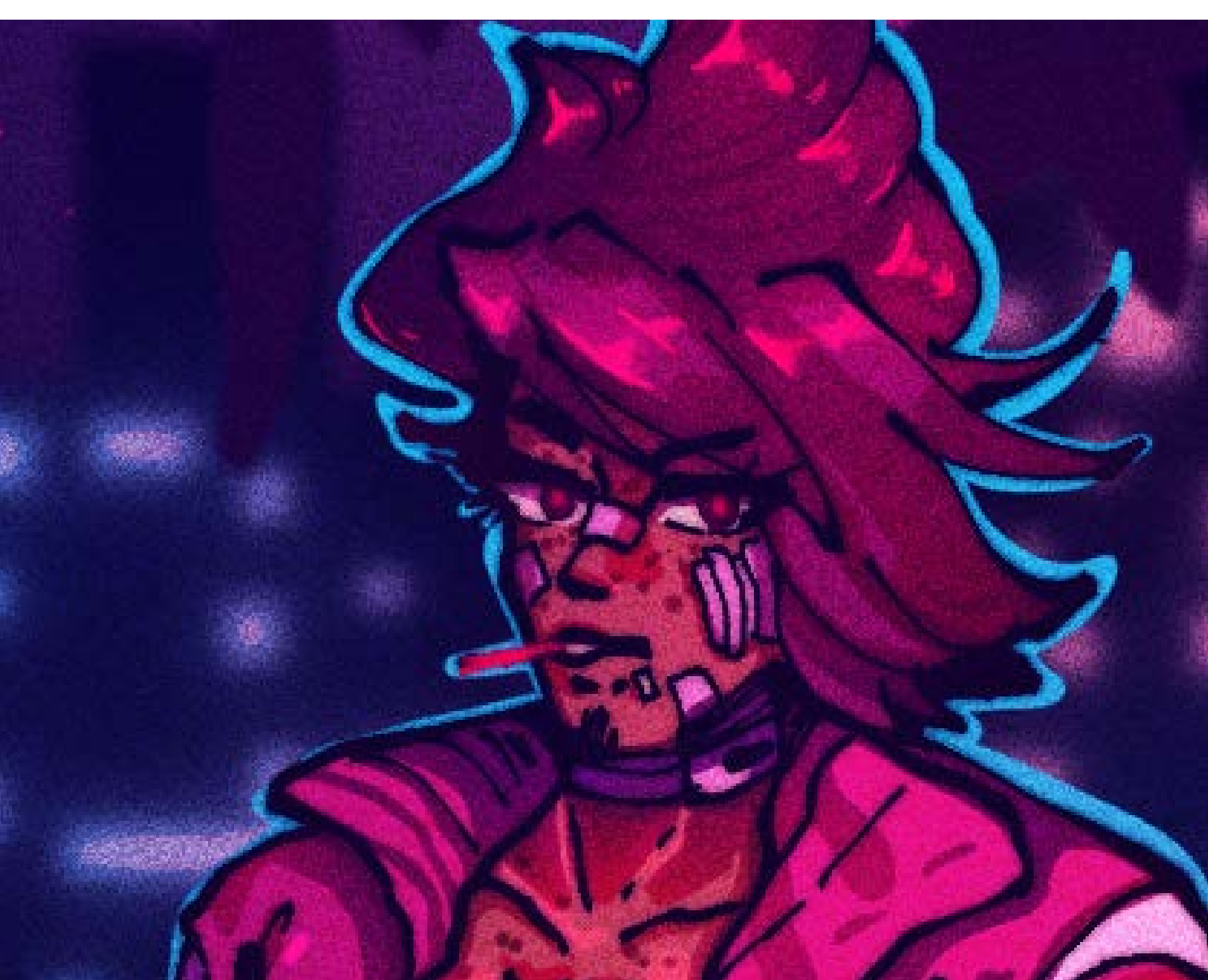
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ARTIST CREDITS

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MERCH ARTIST CREDITS

MODERATOR CREDITS









# SOMETHING IN THE SNOW

Written by Starling

A week ago, Saihara Shuichi stopped responding to any messages.

Two days ago, Momota Kaito and Ouma Kokichi started calling in favors to get a flight to the Arctic Circle set up, a grueling twelve hour flight that had left both of them restless.

But now, the pair found themselves trudging through knee-deep snow, the wreckage of their plane growing smaller behind them as they made their way towards the hint of buildings they could see through the flurry of snow. It was colder than Kaito expected; even though they'd both made sure to check the temperature and dress accordingly, he could feel the wind piercing through his many layers of clothing. Really though, how could he be expected to know how bad it would be? The weather was never this frigid in Japan, even in the furthest reaches of Hokkaido.

"You know, you'd think someone would've come out to investigate by now," Kokichi commented through chattering teeth, arms wrapped tightly around himself. "I mean, it was pretty loud, right?" 'It' being the plane crashing into the snow from its internal systems suddenly failing. Kaito shuddered at the memory, the sensation of the impact still fresh in his mind. It was a miracle neither of them were more injured than they were; Kaito himself was covered in bruises and scrapes, but at least he was alive, unlike their poor pilot.

And yet, despite the ruckus, Kokichi was right—no one had exited from the buildings in the distance. They'd had to drag themselves out of the burning pile of metal when it became clear they'd only be in more danger if they waited for someone to put out the fire. Maybe it wasn't as loud as it sounded to them, though; maybe the snow dampened the sound, maybe everyone was dead asleep...

As if reading Kaito's mind, Kokichi continued his train of thought, muttering, "Maybe no one's here anymore. Or, maybe..." He stopped there, a distant expression on his face. Kaito could see the gears turning even as Kokichi appeared to be trying to shove a stick in 'em, trying to stop the train of thought before it could grow too pessimistic.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves; we haven't even reached the base

yet." Kaito gestured out to the buildings, the nearest one now close enough that he could tell the lights were on. A good sign, if you asked him.

This base they were slowly approaching was supposedly some sort of research facility. Neither of them had more details than that, seeing as Shuichi had been vague about the details of the case that had called him out here. Client confidentiality and all that. It was hard enough to pry the location out of him before he flew out himself. Kaito hated to think what might've happened if they didn't even know where he'd gone; the uncertainty of if Shuichi was okay or not was already driving him nuts.

They reached the door of the first building, and before Kaito could do the decent thing and knock, Kokichi's hand was already on the knob, jiggling it before sighing loudly. "Locked."

"What'd you expect?"

"A nice warm welcome and dinner on the table, obviously." Though spoken with his usual pep, the sarcasm in his voice was crystal clear. Still, he pounded his fist on the door as if he hadn't been trying to enter without permission seconds earlier.

While they waited for a response, Kaito took the opportunity to peer in through the window. Though the lights were on, the interior refused to betray any further signs of life. In fact, it seemed quite the opposite was being revealed; a layer of dust coated the living room's furniture, and a few boxes were tipped over, their contents scattered on the floor and forgotten.

He turned back to Kokichi, finding his gloves tossed aside and red fingers struggling to pick the door open. Any other time he might've objected to the act, but in this situation, what other choice did they have? He certainly didn't want to freeze to death out here, nor was he keen on wandering around to the other buildings, hoping and praying that they'd be open or inhabited, when there was a perfectly good house in front of them with working electricity and—if the universe smiled upon them—heating.

"All right, got it," Kokichi hissed, shoving the door open and hopping inside, bringing a pile of snow into the entryway with him. Kaito paused only to scoop up Kokichi's gloves before entering himself, stomping his feet on the welcome mat to rid his lower half of snow—an action Kokichi didn't mimic, instead wasting no time darting off further into the house. Kaito shook his head as he shoved the door shut, breathing a sigh of relief when he could feel his body slowly heating up now that the wind wasn't swirling around them.

Wet footprints on the hardwood floors lead Kaito around the house,



and he started to wonder what Kokichi was looking for when the boy in question popped up next to him, surprising him enough that he almost slipped on the slickness of the floor.

For once, Kokichi didn't tease him for that. "Looks like this place is running on a generator." He jerked his head towards a room behind them. "Fuel's almost empty, though."

"How long you think it's been abandoned, then?"

Kokichi hummed. "Hard to say. No more than a few days. Maybe three or four max?" He shrugged. "Assuming it was full before whoever was here vanished."

It was hard to ignore the sinking feeling in his gut that surfaced from Kokichi's observation. "And...?"

He shook his head. "Obviously, no sign of Saihara-chan."

A moment of silence fell between them. Even those few seconds were unbearable, Kaito's mind full of unspeakable ideas; he quickly purged them with a shake of his head. "Well, what're we waiting for, then?" he asked, nervousness rippling under his skin. "There's lots of other places to check!"

"Don't be so hasty." Kokichi crossed his arms. "Believe me, I wanna go find him too, as soon as possible."

"But?"

"We need to get our bearings first. Figure out what we're going to do if we don't find him in the next few hours." He started pacing. "Think about it: we're stranded here now. This isn't just a rescue mission anymore—this is a matter of survival for ourselves, too."

Kaito shifted in place, unease growing. He knew Kokichi had a point, but... "That just means we gotta search harder; Shuichi could be in as much trouble, if not more!"

Kokichi ignored his outburst. "Food, warmth, shelter, safety. We have those here, for now." To prove his point, he grabbed Kaito by the wrist and pulled him through the house, stopping once they were in a small pantry. "So, before we move on, empty your dumb bag of anything unnecessary and put some actual useful stuff in there, 'cause who knows what we're going to find."

"Alright, alright, geez." His bag wasn't big; it was just your everyday backpack, one he'd put some snacks and extra clothing in. He pulled out the bulkier clothes and shoved in some canned foods lining the shelves. Hopefully whoever owned this place wouldn't mind them taking their food.

By the time he was done, Kokichi had vanished again. Kaito pulled his significantly heavier bag back on as he wandered out of the pantry, his sore body protesting. He pushed through the pain and found Kokichi standing in the living room, the mess within even more disorganized as it appeared to have been rummaged through.

"Find anything?"

Kokichi gave him a grin as he turned around, a kitchen knife in hand. "Yep!"

Kaito rolled his eyes. "C'mon, don't fool around. You were the one actin' all serious about gathering supplies."

At that, Kokichi pouted. "I know, I know. But I do think it could be useful." He slid the knife back into a leather sheath, before tucking it away in his puffy monochrome jacket. "But anyway, I found some other stuff we can take with us." He scooped something off the couch and handed it to Kaito. It was only a flashlight, but since winter had yet to end, true daytime wouldn't rise on this part of the Earth anytime soon. Navigating without a source of light would be tricky unless they waited for the short period of time that twilight would bless the locals with something other than complete darkness.

"Better than nothing, I suppose," he said, accepting the flashlight and testing it. "Anything else?"

Kokichi nodded. "I found first aid supplies and put them in my bag. Pain meds too." He tilted his head. "Need any? I saw you getting ragdolled and rolling around when we crashed."

Kaito snorted. "You weren't any better; don't think I didn't see that gash you got from the window. You wrap it up at all?"

"Woah, an Uno Reverse! When did Momota-chan become so nosy?" Kokichi deflected. That was a no, then.

Kaito shook his head. "If you're worried about wasting supplies, just say so; we can wrap it in some cloth instead."

Kokichi hesitated but slowly nodded, sitting on the couch and rolling his pant leg up. Sure enough, there was a gash that tore through not only fabric but skin as well. Thankfully, it didn't look too deep thanks to the buffer his pants had given him. Kaito grabbed one of his discarded shirts from the pantry and tore it up for bandages—this was exactly the sort of situation where the skills he picked up in astronaut training could shine.

"Alright, now we're good to go, right?" he asked as he finished tying the knot on the makeshift bandage. When he received a silent nod from Kokichi, Kaito hopped to his feet. "Great; we've got some time before we should think about shelter for the night. Hopefully we'll find him before



then, though. Also..." He pulled out Kokichi's gloves from his pockets. "Be careful not to lose these, okay? Hypothermia and frostbite are no joke."

The two of them made their way out into the frigid snow once more, this time willingly. It didn't stop it from being too cold for Kaito's liking, but he couldn't complain when there was the possibility of Shuichi being far worse off than a little cold. They could only hope that he was indoors somewhere; without a rescue dog, finding someone buried in the snow would be close to impossible. With that in mind, it was easy to determine their next course of action: checking each building one by one.

Though logic would say that they should split up to cover more ground, they instead huddled together as they walked. Step by step they inched forward, like a pair of penguins trying to leech heat off each other—and hell, if his bag was any heavier, Kaito would swear that he'd be waddling like one too. The wind whistled through the layers of his earmuffs and fuzzy hood, almost deafening in the silence around them. He found his eyes darting back and forth through the darkness, trying to search for any signs of life.

Perhaps that's how it happened. One moment he was upright, the next he was face down in the snow. The tiny crystals of ice felt like a million daggers pressed up against his exposed skin, bitter cold yet burning hot. He shouted in alarm, squirming in the blanket of white around him.

"What're you doing, Momota-chan? This isn't the time for snow angels." Kokichi's teasing voice pierced through his panic, lighthearted yet strained. He grabbed Kaito by the arm and hauled him up with a prolonged grunt. "Now, now, who's the one that's going to get frostbite and hypothermia?"

"S-Shut it," Kaito retorted, shaking the snow off himself and shivering. "I just tripped, that's all." That definitely was all. Still, he looked behind them, waving the flashlight around to make sure it was just his imagination.

It almost felt like something had grabbed his ankle.

"Hey, what's that?" Kokichi asked, and Kaito jumped, wildly spinning around and nearly tripping again as he jerked the flashlight to see in front of them again. Nothing immediately stood out, and he almost thought Kokichi was teasing him more, but— "By that building right there," Kokichi directed, tugging his flashlight arm to point at it. "Are those... fireflies?"

Kaito squinted. There *was* something emitting light by one of the

windows, a collection of floating specks that dimmed and lit up at random. But there was no way a bunch of insects would be living in this climate, right? A shiver ran up his spine. There was another explanation, one he *really* didn't want to acknowledge. In fact, it was making running away sound like a great idea now.

Not that Kokichi would let him. "C'mon, let's check it out." His grip still tight on Kaito's arm, he pulled him towards the possibly haunted building. The lights didn't disperse even as they drew closer—in fact, they seemed to grow brighter, more and more coming into sight. Kaito could even see some on the other side of a window, the only lighting in an otherwise dark interior.



The lockpicks were whipped out again, easily defeating the lock on the door. That wasn't the only line of defense this door had, however; when Kokichi went to open it, it became clear that someone had barricaded it shut. It took both of them pushing and shoving to create a gap small enough for Kokichi to slip through.

It was barely a moment before Kaito heard a gasp. "Saihara-chan," Kokichi whispered, only just loud enough for Kaito to hear.

"He's in there?!" Kaito called out, but there was no response. Desperation pumped itself into his veins, and he scrambled away from the door, far enough that he could get a running start and slam into the door. It gave way just enough that he too could slip inside, though he admittedly was afraid of what he would find. But he had to know. An astronaut couldn't be afraid of the unknown, after all.

Inside, Kokichi was already at Shuichi's side, fingers on his neck in a tell-tale search for vitals. The orbs of light surrounded the two of them, bright enough that Kaito hardly needed the flashlight at all. Slowly, fearfully, he approached them.

His throat was tight as he asked, "Is... Is he...?"

"He's alive," Kokichi answered, before he lowered his hands to Shuichi's shoulders, gently shaking. Shuichi's head lolled limply, unresponsive at first, before stiffening, and—

"Don't touch me!" Shuichi jerked awake with a sudden shout, violently flinching away from Kokichi's probing touch. He scrambled away, a wild, almost feral look in his eyes, a deep darkness Kaito had never seen before. Kokichi pulled back as well, his own eyes wide with surprise and guilt. He looked to Kaito, then back to Shuichi, seemingly at a loss for words.

Kaito stepped forward, and in a soft, placating voice said, "Woah, hey,



Shuichi, calm down. It's just us; are you okay?"

The attempt was fruitless, Shuichi's unfocused eyes darting between them rapidly as he huddled himself into the far corner of the room. "Who are you?! You're not—you can't be—they're supposed to be in Japan, they're supposed to be safe—!" He clutched his chest, his breath coming out in short gasps. His words made no sense, but one thing was clear enough: Shuichi was terrified, to the point where he'd barricaded himself away to keep safe.

From what was the question.

"Saihara-chan," Kokichi murmured, standing but not drawing closer. In moments like these, it was hard to tell what Kokichi was thinking, but Kaito could tell that he was worried and thinking just as hard as he was to figure this out. The look in his eyes was fierce, proof of a rapidly spinning mind at work behind them.

Finally, Kokichi looked at Shuichi head on, voice firm as he said, "Do you remember what you told me before you came out here? That once you returned, we were going to go out for tea and cake, right? No one but you and I know that."

Shuichi stared at him, eyes still wide and full of suspicion. His whole body shook alongside the creaking windows against the Arctic wind. But before either Kokichi or Kaito could say more to convince him, his shoulders dropped, Shuichi retracting his defenses as he curled into a ball, sobbing, "Dammit... Why would you come here? Why?"

"We were worried about you," Kaito answered, heart tight in his chest. "What's going on? Are you hurt?" Shuichi shook his head, fingers clenched tightly into the arms of his coat. Kaito couldn't take it anymore. He hurried to his side, sitting down next to him and placing a hand on his shoulder, keeping it there even when Shuichi flinched at the contact. "Shuichi, you gotta let us know what happened."

Shuichi's lip quivered as he raised his head. From how close he was now, Kaito could see deep bags under his bloodshot eyes. "It's—There's—When we landed, they—" Shuichi's breath caught suddenly. In a small, fearful voice, he whispered, "They're here."

Glass shattering nearby broke the silence before Kaito could inquire further. He felt his own breath stop. His head snapped towards the direction of the noise, towards the next room over. Barely a meter from the door leading to it, Kokichi froze, wide-eyed, a deer caught in Kaito's flashlight. He gestured for Kokichi to come closer, to the safety of their corner, but the other merely shook his head, raising a single finger to his lips.

Shuffling, lumbering thuds of heavy footsteps sounded. The room grew colder, and with it, he felt a layer of fatigue fall upon him. Next to him, Shuichi suddenly reached out, grasping Kaito's arm tightly. The lights around them flickered, as if trying to guide whatever broke in to their location.

Then, the door shook, a throaty growl filling the darkness. The frame creaked under the force, doorknob rattling against the lock—a lock that he was entirely unsure would matter if it resorted to ramming into the door.

But he would never know. After some time, too long of a time, it stopped, and the floating lights around them dimmed completely, like candles being snuffed out. Silence consumed them. Still, none of them dared to speak for many more minutes after that.

Kaito had to gather all his courage to speak up. "It's... It's alright. We're safe." He didn't believe it, but he said it anyway. Someone had to, even if—no, *especially* if Shuichi and Kokichi didn't believe it either. Firmly, he repeated himself, "It'll be alright. We'll... We'll find a way out of this. I promise."













## RUMMAGING FOR ANSWERS

Written by lakesandquarries

**WHEN** Shuichi was 7, he was afraid of elevators.

The fear had started with one of his mother's movies, perfectly average and bland, but he'd watched it ravenously like every other movie she had a hand in, desperate to find a connection.

There was no substance to the movie at all, but there was one scene that stuck with him. The main character, a detective, got himself stuck in an elevator, trapped between floors. On the phone with his wife, he raged and panicked, and finally some mechanism clicked. The elevator crashed down three floors before it stopped and the door flung open, allowing the main character to interrupt a perfect murder.

The elevator was intended to kill him. In the end it saved him and a potential victim, but the scene - the terrifying drop that, as Shuichi learned later, would have killed someone in real life - stuck with him. He'd refused to use elevators after that, convinced every time that it would break, and they would die. It was likely a contributing factor when his parents made the decision to send him away.

Shuichi's uncle was the one who actually helped. He was always the one who helped. In this case, he'd taken Shuichi to a nearby mall with a glass elevator, and they'd spent hours riding up and down while his uncle explained how the mechanisms worked, the likelihood of what happened in the movie, the safety requirements all elevators had to meet. It did not occur to him at the time to wonder why his uncle knew so much about a topic unrelated to his job.

Later he'd realized his uncle researched it for him. Had researched many of his childhood fears, took them just as seriously as any missing person.

Shuichi stopped being afraid of elevators after that, but right now he thinks he's developing a new fear. Not of elevators, but of what they can cause.

The small space is dark, lit only by the flashlight from Shuichi's phone. He can't see Kaito, can barely see Kokichi as the boy paces, refusing to stop moving for even a second.



"I'm bored," Kokichi announces.

"You've mentioned," Kaito grumbles. As Shuichi swings his phone over he sees Kaito curled up on the ground, hand in his hair, gently tugging at it the way he tends to when he's stressed.

He's seen a lot of new habits from Kaito in the months since they woke up from the killing game, between recovery and living together and the cautious, terrifying new relationship they've started.

Kaito is brave, and strong, just like he was in the game, but it's a different kind than what Shuichi had thought. In the killing game Kaito did his best to seem untouchable, on a level above the others, too stubborn to take damage. In the real world he's a little more willing to be vulnerable, to admit to his bad days.

Shuichi is attentive. He has to be, to be with Kaito and Kokichi, who despite all their best efforts and growth seem almost offended by the idea of being really, truly honest about their feelings and struggles. Unlike Shuichi, who can't hide no matter how hard he tries. But his own anxiety only makes it easier for him to spot it in his partners, to see the points where his own behavior is reflected, to pick up on their specific tells.

So: Shuichi goes into detective mode, watching his boyfriends in the dim light of his phone flashlight. Kaito is on the floor, curled up, hands tugging on his hair and gaze tilted down. He's quiet, the only sound from his unsteady breathing. Kokichi is pacing, except for the moments when he pauses and stands completely, unnaturally still. He's humming to himself, a tuneless song.

Neither of them are okay, and Shuichi isn't sure why.

"Can I sit here?" he asks Kaito quietly, waiting for him to look up and nod before Shuichi slides down and presses against Kaito's side, shoulders and legs knocking together. He can feel Kaito's sharp inhale. "Kokichi? Do you wanna come sit with us?"

"No," Kokichi says, but he joins anyway, sprawling across the laps of both boys, still humming. Shuichi pulls him close, running his fingers through Kokichi's dark hair.

"I used to be afraid of elevators." The silence feels heavier somehow in the dark. "There was a movie that scared me. My uncle helped me get over it."

"I'm not afraid of elevators," Kaito says, voice gruff.

"I wasn't suggesting that you are. But you are scared of something."

Kaito's breathing tells Shuichi everything he needs to know.

"Don't be a baby, Momota-chan," Kokichi huffs, turning over in Shuichi's lap so he's face up. "You're an astronaut, aren't you? Shouldn't

you looove shitty little airtight spaces like this? Just like a rocket!"

"Rockets are usually bigger than this, idiot," Kaito grumbles. He's still pressed against Shuichi, but it feels like he's miles away. In a rocket of his own, perhaps, a tiny one, shot into a false version of space.

"Kaito, are you claustrophobic?" Shuichi asks, as the pieces slot into place.

"Of course not!" His voice echoes in the small space. "C'mon, Shuichi, you know me better than that. I'm not afraid of anything. What's there to be scared about? I mean, it sucks, but we'll get rescued soon, I'm sure of it."

Once, Shuichi might have believed him. That was before he saw Kaito die, before he spent countless hours beside a VR pod, waiting for him to wake up.

Kaito and Kokichi had been amongst the last. Both woke up badly - Kaito had tried to smash his way out, and Kokichi had started shrieking. Not to mention the physical issues they both struggled with. Kaito's lung issues, while not as bad as they'd been in VR, were unfortunately real. Kokichi had been almost completely paralyzed when he woke up and even now, months later, he still has days where his limbs lock up, where even breathing is an effort.

And even still, it pales in comparison to the mental struggle. That's one all three struggle with. Even with the others alive, Shuichi has daily battles with survivor's guilt. Kaito's hero facade seems to be the only thing that keeps him moving some days. Kokichi wakes up screaming more often than not, and the days he doesn't it's only because he manages to physically stop himself.

Every day the cracks get bigger, and Shuichi is growing tired of waiting for the two he loves to shatter.

"The exisal was pretty small, wasn't it? And Monokuma's execution - the rocket was even smaller than that."

Kaito's breath catches, turning an inhale into a gasp.

"Shuichi," Kaito grounds out. Shuichi can hear the anger that bubbles up, the seething heat under Kaito's skin, but he knows him too well. Once, when Shuichi was weaker, he would've backed down. That was a different Shuichi, a different life.

"The press," Shuichi says, quietly. "There's not a lot of space there, either."

"Kind of the point, Saihara-chan." Kokichi's voice is flat. Shuichi can't feel him moving. He can feel Kokichi's back against his legs, knows that he's looking up. Looking, but not seeing. "It starts off pretty cramped, and that's before it gets to work."



“Stop talking,” Kaito says sharply. “Shut *up*.”

“Ooooh, don’t like thinking about tiny little spaces, huh? Don’t wanna think about this space getting even smaller, small enough that you can’t breathe, watching the walls sink in and you know you’re gonna die and the funniest part is that everyone’s gonna celebrate, they’re gonna throw a fucking *party*—”

“*Shut up!*”

Kaito slaps him. Shuichi doesn’t know how Kaito manages it in the dark, but the sound is unmistakable, as is Kokichi’s whining after.

“Kaito!” Shuichi says.

“He was trying to piss me off!”

“I think you mean succeeded.” There’s shuffling, Kokichi’s legs scrambling to push him upright. “What’s the matter, Momota-chan?”

“I’m not claustrophobic,” Kaito mutters.

“And I don’t have panic attacks when the coffee machine makes that specific whirring sound. I’m so glad you’ve taken up lying!”

“Both of you, stop it!” Even in the dark Shuichi finds them, laying a hand on each shoulder. “You can’t just argue with each other and pretend that’s going to fix anything. Kaito, it’s okay if you’re scared.” He can hear Kaito open his mouth, the first syllable of an argument on his tongue, and Shuichi stops him. “Heroes get scared too. You’re the one who taught me that. That *I* could be a hero, even when I was scared, and if I can manage then so can you.”

Kaito’s jaw clicks shut.

“Kokichi, stop antagonizing him. You’re scared too, and being an ass about it won’t fix it.”

“When the hell did you get so confident?” Kaito asks. There’s pride in his voice, under the shaking.

“I’m not,” Shuichi admits. “I got good at lying while you two were asleep.”

“It’s not lying,” Kokichi says, subdued. “Everything you’ve said is true. And your confidence tastes authentic.”

Shuichi does not question what, exactly, false confidence tastes like. He trusts that Kokichi knows, and doesn’t have a good explanation.

“The exisal wasn’t built to fit a person,” Kaito says, quietly. “It was for the Monokubs. I had to shove myself in and there was all sorts of machinery poking me, some of it felt like getting stabbed. Plus my - my lungs -” In the dim light Shuichi can see him press his hand against his chest.

“I forget how to breathe sometimes,” Kokichi says, conversationally. “We’ll be broken together, Momota-chan.”

“You’re not broken. Either of you.” Shuichi fumbles for their hands, Kaito’s broad palms and Kokichi’s delicate fingers, squeezing gently. “We’re alive. That’s what matters. Thank you, Kaito. For being honest.”

Kaito grunts. “Are we done now? Do you need me to drag up more shit?”

“No,” Shuichi says, at the same moment that Kokichi says, “Yes!”

“You don’t have to share. But you don’t have to hide,” Shuichi clarifies.

“It’s not hiding. It’s...”

“It’s hiding,” Kokichi says. “Shuichi’s the only one of us who isn’t a coward, and isn’t that ironic? You keep acting like you’re a big strong tough guy and I keep acting like I don’t wish I never woke up and our dear little Saihara-chan is the only one with the decency to admit how fucked up he is.”

“You called me Shuichi,” is the only thing he can say in response to that.

“It’s not hard.”

“No. But you never do it.”

“Don’t read too much into it,” Kokichi says, and in the next breath he says, “Kaito?” and the astronaut beside him flinches.

“I don’t want to do this,” Kaito mutters. “I’m glad I woke up. I’d rather be here than dead. I’m not - I’m not *that* fucked up,” he says, and then mutters, “sorry.”

“Oh, I know I’m fucked up,” Kokichi says, and suddenly he’s slotting himself in between Shuichi and Kaito, an arm around their shoulders, pulling them close. “Like I said. We’ll be broken together.”

“You’re not broken,” Shuichi says again, only for Kokichi’s hand to cover his mouth.

“Nothing wrong with being a little broken. We’ll put each other back together.”

“We’re the ones that broke each other,” Kaito huffs.

“Which just makes us all the more qualified!”

Shuichi feels like he should be arguing. Like he should insist that none of them are broken, there’s nothing wrong, but - that would be a lie, wouldn’t it? There’s pieces of them that will never again fit right, new traumas and triggers they have to look for, and maybe...

Maybe that’s okay. Maybe, if it’s together, it’s okay if they’re a little fucked up.



Shuichi leans his head against Kokichi's shoulder with a sigh. "I hate to say it, but... maybe you're right."

"I'm always right," Kokichi says, which Shuichi expected, but the gentle kiss to his forehead was *not* something he had prepared for. He's glad for the darkness to hide his blush.

"Kokichi, you're handling this... weirdly well," Kaito says, and from the location of his voice Shuichi thinks he's leaning on Kokichi's other shoulder.

"Oh, this is pure adrenaline. I'll have my breakdown later."

Kaito huffs, something close to a laugh, and - something in the mechanism clicks. For a moment Shuichi is watching that movie again, but the elevator doesn't crash, just starts to gently rise the way it's supposed to. The doors open to their floor, leaving all three squinting in the sudden brightness.

Kokichi is the first one to his feet, fumbling to unlock the door and rushing inside before Shuichi and Kaito have even exited the elevator. Kaito walks on shaky legs, Shuichi lending his shoulder, and together they stumble into the bedroom to join Kokichi, already burying himself under the covers. Shuichi grabs for the smaller boy, pulling him close. Kokichi inhales shakily and clings to him just like Shuichi thought he would.

The blinds shuffle as Kaito pulls them open, light flooding into the room, and Kokichi buries his face into Shuichi's shoulder and does not look lost the way Kaito was just a moment ago. When Kaito joins them Kokichi's head rises for just a second as a broad hand curls along his back, Kaito settling on the bed to envelope both of them from the side.

"You're okay," Shuichi says, resting his hand on Kokichi's head. "We're okay."

"Sorry for slapping you," Kaito mumbles, running a hand through Kokichi's hair.

"Oh, don't be. I was trying to piss you off." Kokichi's face remains pressed into Shuichi's shoulder.

"Still shouldn't hit you. I'm better than that."

"You are," both Shuichi and Kokichi say. Shuichi clears his throat but says no more as Kokichi continues, raising his head to meet Kaito's eyes. "You know I'm not mad, right? I'd let you kill me again if you wanted to."

Kaito's inhale is sharp and pained, hand tensing where it grips Shuichi's shoulder. "Don't say that. I won't. I wouldn't, even if you..."

"Even if I blackmailed you into it again? You can say it, you know. It's miserable dancing around this with you. You killed me because I forced

you to, and I effectively killed you by getting you executed, so I think we're even."

"You didn't kill him," Shuichi protests, too tired and shaken to stop himself. There's something like bravery running in his veins, an adrenaline that he's sure will leave him shaking later. "That one is my fault."

"Don't you dare," Kaito argues, turning to him sharply, a familiar fire in his eyes. "You were only doing what I taught you to. Neither of you are responsible for that shit, and if you blame yourselves again I'll have to knock some sense into you!"

"Hypocrite," Kokichi mutters, settling against Shuichi's shoulder again. "We're all at fault, or it's no one's fault, or it's the games fault, does it really matter? We killed each other and were killed and we ended up here just the same. If it took dying to get here, then..." He hums softly, nuzzling into Shuichi, a hand gripping Kaito's shirt to pull him closer.

Kokichi does not say what he means. Usually that means outright lying, but sometimes it's smaller, trailing off before he has to speak the words, deflecting and avoiding like it's something he's trained for.

Shuichi knows him now. He knows the shape of Kokichi's heart, the gaps between his words, can read the silence like a letter.

His lips graze Kokichi's ear, the words soft enough that only he can hear. "I love you," Shuichi says, and Kokichi hums again and presses a kiss to his shoulder, and Kaito sighs and leans himself over the both of them, making himself a wall. Behind his arms they are safe, with just enough space that they can look out and make sure they protect Kaito in return.

"Love you," Kaito mumbles as he rests his head on top of Shuichi's, forming almost a tower of the three of them. Kokichi whines, but his response is still audible, even whispered with his face buried in Shuichi's sleeve.

"Love you too."





SOLDIER  
SOLDIER











# ECHOES OF THE PAST

Written by golden-redhead

## "HURRY UP!"

Kaito's booming voice carried a hint of panic as he grabbed Shuichi's arm, both of them making a wild run towards their shelter. "Just a little more!"

Shuichi could feel his heart hammering in between his ribs, only panic and Kaito's firm grip on his arm keeping him going. His legs were burning from the exertion, an old ankle injury reminding him of its existence with spikes of sharp pain shooting through his bone with every step.

It felt like forever until they finally reached their latest hiding spot, Kaito yanking the door open and practically shoving Shuichi inside with enough force that almost made him lose his balance.

Kokichi ducked after them, the door slamming after him with a resounding thud. Kaito didn't waste any time, already pushing the old, wooden desk against the door to barricade it, the creatures behind it groaning and protesting angrily, still reaching in their direction as if hoping they could phase through the door.

For a long moment, only the sound of commotion outside and their panting could be heard as all three of them tried to catch their breath after the mad dash for safety.

"Whoa," Kokichi giggled, clutching the latest finds from their scavenger hunt tightly against his chest, sweat-matted hair plastered to his forehead in long dark strands. "Saihara-chan, that one freakishly tall kid from general studies almost got you! What was his name again?"

Shuichi flinched as if slapped, rubbing nervously at the bruise adorning the side of his elbow that refused to fade. He hated when Kokichi referred to them using names he once associated with people he used to know, faces he used to pass every day in the corridors hurrying to his lessons.

Faces he never expected to see twisted in grimaces devoid of humanity, staring at him with hungry, empty eyes and reaching for him greedily. It was like looking at the distorted images of people he once knew, familiar and yet lacking resemblance with the teenagers he knew for years that gossiped behind the benches merely a few days ago. It felt like a lifetime has passed since then, any traces of the life they once knew gone and lost forever.

Kaito shifted next to him, a grim expression on his face. "It was Matsuda," he informed Kokichi tiredly, leaning heavily against the wall. In the dim light, Shuichi could clearly see the yellow-ish bruise near his jaw and the long-dry blood smeared over his forehead and disappearing over the line of his hair. He looked weary, every tired line of his face exposed in the aftermath of their little expedition to get more supplies. It was jarring to see him like this, every flaw suddenly laying bare right in front of him and presented so clearly.

It's the side of Kaito he's never seen before, the side of him that's been hidden from view so perfectly that for the longest time Shuichi wasn't aware it even existed.

It feels silly now that he would ever think so, naively believing that Kaito was somehow spared by the cruelty of the universe and the confident, brave persona he sold to the world was his true face. It's shameful, really, how long Shuichi allowed himself to be comforted by this lie and had taken things at face value despite it being his job as the detective to dig deeper than most people and look for evidence when supposedly there was none.

Kokichi snapped his fingers, grinning. "Matsuda, right! Eh, serves him right, I never liked that guy anyway," he remarked with a one-shoulder shrug.

Shuichi could sense Kaito tensing next to him, hands curling into fists. He looked like he wanted to say something, the way he always did whenever Kokichi said something outrageously nasty and smirked in that provocative way of his – always too widely and too sweetly to be anything but fake. He remained quiet this time, however, lips pressed into a thin line and shoulders strained with tension.

Somehow, that scared Shuichi more than anything – this strange passivity that didn't suit him in the slightest.

Kaito never hesitated to defend what was right – usually loudly and disruptively – demanding the attention of everyone around even if it meant earning himself new enemies. He would take a stand even in the most dire of situations simply because he believed it was the right thing to do.

Shuichi bit his lip.

"Ouma-kun, p-please don't say things like that," he said quietly, digging his fingernails deep into the skin of his palm. "No matter what anyone did in their life, no one deserves... that," he finished lamely, gesturing weakly towards the door.

Kokichi stared at him for a long moment, so long in fact that Shuichi had to fight the urge to start fidgeting under the sudden scrutiny.

It took a few more long moments before Kokichi seemingly found what he was looking for in his expression, baring his teeth in a sharp smile.



“About time Saihara-chan decided to grow himself a shiny new spine and speak freely,” he commented, nodding approvingly. “Good job!”

“Um...”

“That’s enough, Ouma,” Kaito interrupted harshly.

“Aww.” Kokichi cocked his head to the side, his hair laying flat against the side of his face. “But I thought Momota-chan wanted Saihara-chan to learn how to stand up for himself! After all,” his voice suddenly dropped and he leaned forward, something dark and twisted flashing in his expression, “he won’t always be there to hold Saihara-chan’s hand, will he?”

“Will you fucking shut up?” Kaito managed through gritted teeth.

Kokichi raised an eyebrow. “Or what? You’ll throw me out for the zombies to eat?”

Kaito huffed at that, something hurt and mildly offended flickering across his face. He turned to Shuichi instead, ignoring Kokichi’s question completely.

“Come on, sidekick. Let’s get some rest, we have a busy day ahead of us. I’ll take the first shift on lookout.”

“Are you sure? You must be tired, too.”

Kaito smiled, flashing him a thumbs up. “I’ll be fine,” he assured him. “Go ahead, get some sleep.”

Shuichi hesitated for a moment longer, studying Kaito’s face in the dark room, but it remained more unreadable than ever, sending a pang of uneasiness down his chest.

“Okay,” he relented, knowing that nothing he said would change Kaito’s mind. “Goodnight.”

Kaito sent him another quick smile. “G’night.”

Shuichi sighed, moving to find a good spot on the floor to settle for the night, Kokichi’s words still echoing in his head.

*He won’t always be there to hold Saihara-chan’s hand.*

He pulled his blazer higher, unsuccessfully trying to shield himself against the sudden chill.



Shuichi hardly remembered how it started.

All he remembered is the iron smell of blood penetrating the air, screams and cries all around him, blending with the groaning, hissing

sounds of the zombies in a cacophony of noises he never expected to hear outside of a horror movie.

What started like a regular day was harshly interrupted by an explosion of panic as the world around him erupted into chaos. Whenever he closed his eyes, Shuichi could still see the tall form of one of the older students, the Ultimate Mechanic, with deep gashes in his shoulder and a blood-soaked uniform, lunging at him across the cafeteria with bared teeth as other students shrieked in horror and tried to escape from his way.

He remembered running, dodging teeth and slipping on the blood, directionless and disoriented, trying to ignore the sick sounds of squelching flesh, cracking bones and teeth tearing through skin coming from all around him.

Shuichi didn’t know how long he was running around, chased by what used to be his classmates and teachers. He thought that he saw Himiko at some point – sweet little Himiko, curled up in the corner of a classroom – being shielded by Tenko, her sobs and screams drowned out by the snarling of a zombie sinking his teeth in the Ultimate Aikido Master’s calf.

He also remembered staring death right in the eyes when one of the zombies – a small blonde girl from Class 77-B – managed to back him into a corner, snarling and crawling closer on grotesquely bent legs, trapping Shuichi between her and the wall, only to be pushed aside at the last second right before she could lurch herself at him.

Shuichi blinked, once, twice, blinking back the tears as he looked up, almost expecting to see Kaito coming to his rescue the way he always said he would.

It wasn’t Kaito’s looming form, though, but Kokichi’s much smaller one that appeared above him, shoving the angrily shrieking zombie away using a nearby chair and then pulling Shuichi up until he was half-dragging his stupid, unresponsive body into the safety of one of the bathroom stalls.

“Saihara-chan, do you have a death wish?” Kokichi hissed as soon as they made it inside, spinning to face him. Shuichi instinctively took a step back, blinking away the blood and sweat and staring at his classmate in wide-eyed shock.

Half of Kokichi’s face was covered in blood and grime, his pale skin a striking contrast with the deep shade of red smeared all over his features. He was breathing heavily and leaning against the wall, lilac eyes bright with urgency.

Shuichi swallowed thickly around the lump lodged in his throat.



“W-what is going on?”

Kokichi scoffed. “What does it look like to you, Saihara-chan?”

Shuichi sucked in a shuddering breath. “These are zombies, right? Like... Like in the movies?”

Kokichi shrugged, baring his teeth in a smile. “Seems like it!” he said with faux-cheer in his voice. “Truly, your deduction skills are astounding, Saihara-chan! No wonder you are a detective!”

Shuichi closed his eyes, leaning against the door of the bathroom stall and hoping to wake up from this nightmare.



They stumbled upon Kaito on the second day, searching for supplies and anything that could be used as a weapon in one of the abandoned classrooms of Hope’s Peak Academy.

Despite his sprained wrist and various injuries, Kaito seemed to be in a good condition, everything considered.

And yet, Shuichi couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was wrong.

It was subtle, barely noticeable, evident in the frown that was present on his face whenever he thought Shuichi wasn’t looking and how his hand shook the first time he finished off a zombie that was inches away from biting into Shuichi’s shoulder.



“I hope others are okay...” Shuichi admitted quietly, almost guiltily, munching slowly on a piece of mochi found in one of the abandoned backpacks. It tasted like dry paper, but he kept on eating, knowing it might be his last meal if they don’t find more food soon.

“I’m sure they are,” Kaito said confidently, flashing him a quick smile and leaning forward to squeeze his shoulder. “Miu’s probably already working on some kind of zombie weapon that will put an end to this and you won’t even notice when things will be back to normal! Kirumi will throw a celebratory dinner and we’ll be back to worrying about our homework and exams in no time.”

Kokichi, surprisingly, remained quiet. The shuffling sound as he draped an old blanket around his small body and turned to face away from them was Shuichi's only answer.



It was Kokichi who kept them alive that first week.

He was the one who sneaked into the Ultimate Assassin’s Lab one night and unceremoniously dropped a crossbow at Kaito’s feet the next morning, startling both him and Shuichi awake. And he was the one who knew about the secret storage room with snacks and drinks from the vending machines.

Shuichi learned not to question how Kokichi knew that Maki taught Kaito before how to use a crossbow or when he found out about the secret shortcuts at Hope’s Peak, ones that even he, the Ultimate Detective, was not aware of. Kaito tried asking at first, but Kokichi’s answers were just as evasive as they always were. Still, he was an asset, and for all of Kaito’s gloating and confidence, he didn’t think the two of them would make it without Kokichi’s help.

In different circumstances, he couldn’t imagine a bigger blow to Kaito’s pride. Then again, nothing about these circumstances was normal.

Where Shuichi expected there to be rage or maybe jealousy, all he could see was surprise with the faintest hint of what he would later recognize as pride.

Somehow, he found that strangely disturbing. The ultimate proof that things would never be how they once were.



Kaito taught him how to use the crossbow.

Kokichi explained how to handle the knife.

Even then, Shuichi couldn’t help but feel useless, forced to depend on them without contributing anything on his own.



“How is he?”

Shuichi sighed, pulling his hand away from Kokichi’s forehead. “I think his fever went down a little,” he said uncertainly, lifting his head to get a better look at Kaito, the astronaut’s face obscured by the shadows. “But it’s not looking good.”

Kaito grunted in acknowledgment. “Keep me updated. If he doesn’t get better by the next morning we’ll have to move. We need to get to the infirmary. Maybe there’s something useful left.”

Shuichi simply nodded, unable to say anything, his insides twisted in nervous knots. He turned his attention back to Kokichi, his labored



breathing the only noise in the Ultimate Pianist’s Lab, which was serving as their hiding spot for the last few days. The overwhelming presence of Kaede was nearly palatable here, the bloodied pages filled with her handwritten notes scattered over the floor – a composition she was working on before it all started and all their Ultimate titles lost their meaning. Their little stack of food was diminishing with each passing day, a constant worry somewhere at the back of Shuichi’s mind.

He squeezed Kokichi’s hand in his, looking at his pinched with pain expression and praying that he would get better soon.

They needed him. As strange as it felt to admit it, they really needed him.



It took eight long days for Kokichi to recover and it was nothing short of a miracle.

Even days later, Shuichi could still remember the heavy, sinking feeling in his stomach when they finally made it to the infirmary, barely escaping death in the process, only to find it completely demolished, unmarked pills scattered on the floor and medicine cabinets smashed into pieces. He could remember the sound of utter despair that tore itself from his throat and the way Kaito’s shoulders dropped in defeat at the sight, Kokichi’s pitiful, wheezing breathing the only noise as they stared, their last hope gone.

Things got worse before they got better.

With Kokichi being barely conscious for days, Shuichi had no other choice but to make himself useful, sorting through what was left of the infirmary, searching for anything that could be of help while Kaito left, promising to come back with some food.

Shuichi’s never been more scared than in that moment, stuck by Kokichi’s side, scared that each breath could be his last and waiting for Kaito’s return. Even the occasional shuffling behind the door and the groaning sounds of the zombies still trapped in the school didn’t seem as scary as the possibility of both of his classmates being gone.



“Nishishi. I won!”

Kaito glared at him from across the table, clicking his tongue in disapproval. “Like hell you did,” he barked, eyes flicking back to his cards. “You are totally cheating!”

Kokichi gasped, eyes filling with tears. He pressed his hand to his heart, looking hurt and sniffing pitifully. “Are you calling me a liar, Momota-chan?”

“A liar *and* a cheater.”

“Where did you even find these cards, Ouma-kun?” Shuichi asked curiously, leaning in to take a look at Kaito’s cards and wincing in sympathy. There was no way for his friend to win this one.

“It’s for me to know and for you to wonder, Saihara-chan!” Kokichi chirped cheerfully, ignoring the furious glares Kaito was sending his way. “Let it be my little secret.”



“We need to leave.”

Kokichi and Kaito both perked up when he suddenly spoke up, Kokichi tearing his eyes away from his deck of cards that he was playing with and Kaito stopping his count of canned food and bottled water and turning to look up at him.

“Leave?” Kokichi tilted his head to the side curiously. “Whatcha mean by that, Saihara-chan?”

Shuichi fidgeted in place, absently playing with the hem of the sweater he found only days prior in one of the lockers. “There’s no point staying at Hope’s Peak anymore,” he said, voice quiet but sure. “We searched everywhere. There are no more survivors other than us, we’re running out of food and if we were about to be rescued then it would have happened already. There’s nothing left for us here.”

Kaito sighed heavily. “You’re right. Our supplies should last us about three more days but after that we’d have to go out again anyway.”

Kokichi tapped his finger against his chin in thought. “And how do you propose we leave?”

Shuichi straightened. “We’ll need a plan,” he said slowly. “I suggest that we start packing right away and plan on where to move first. We need to figure out what state the rest of the world is in, look for some survivor camps and get our hands on more weapons. We know that the zombies are sensitive to sound, we could use it to our advantage.”

Kaito hummed, deep in thought. “You mean by luring them to one place?”

The Ultimate Detective nodded in response. “Yes. That would give us some time to grab our things and get out of the building unnoticed while they are distracted.”

“And how are we planning to do that, Saihara-chan?” Kokichi asked,



but he was already eyeing the old radio standing on the nurse's desk, confirming Shuichi's suspicion that they were thinking about the same thing.

Shuichi smiled. “We’ll use what we have. The radio and the school’s broadcasting system. If we lure them to the cafeteria, we’ll be able to reach one of the emergency exits in the hall.”

“Nishishi,” Kokichi laughed, staring at him with eyes sparkling with mischief. “I suppose that would work, Saihara-chan. Guess you aren’t as half-brained as I thought you were!”

Kaito looked between both of his classmates, a smile slowly blooming on his face. “Are we doing it, then?” he asked, excited.

Shuichi nodded, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Yeah. We’re doing this.”

“Hell yeah!” Kaito pumped his fist in the air. “Let’s get out of here!”











## HOPE, DESPAIR, AND NEW BEGINNINGS

Written by themaybelltree

### "-KICHI?"

Air that shouldn't be filling Kokichi Ouma's lungs expanded his ribs, as cold bursts of energy flowed from the crown of his head to his fingertips brushing past his thighs. The surface was cold—much like the hydraulic press—but he had already seen the top of the machine descend upon him, so that didn't make any sense.

"Oh, he's awake!"

His fingers flexed as they grasped upon the metal, and his eyelids blinked as white filled his vision. For a moment, he wondered if it was purgatory, or heaven or hell, and as his gaze fell to long-deceased peers his suspicion was granted. "Kaede?" he asked, as two bright eyes much like his own mirrored his shocked expression.

"Wow..." she marveled, "You took a while."

"What?" he questioned, but the girl had already turned away from him to call someone else, and a white lab coat was the next thing he saw. And past that, he could see television screens, bright and fluorescent as Shuichi pointed at Tsumugi and Tsumugi turned into someone called Junko Enoshima.

Things made less sense now, but he should've suspected Tsumugi; the girl was too unassuming to be anyone worth watching in a killing game.

"Am I dead?" he asked the person in the lab coat, a young girl with long, black hair. The doctor was silent, avoiding his eyes as he attempted to maintain contact. She brought a stethoscope to his chest, waited for a few moments, and then jotted something down on a notepad and left his side. Stethoscope? Why would they measure a dead man's heartbeat?

The answer was obvious, but painfully nauseating.

"No," a familiar voice spoke to his left, and across the room, still glued to a wall, he saw the ruggish gaze of Kaito Momota. The person who killed him. The person who, judging by the fact that he was with them all, must've been executed for killing Kokichi Ouma. If things didn't make sense before, they made less sense now. "You're not dead. None of us



are. It was all fake.” Kaito’s voice was different than how it had always been. He spoke with resolution, yet his tone was dead and far-gone, like something had taken all the passion from him.

*Something* that made his stomach lurch, his eyes water, and his gaze to flip to each and every person in the room until he saw *them*. Gonta. Miu.

It was *fake*.

*It was all fake!*

His voice felt like it was stuck in his throat, and with force he uttered, “How did we...? All the executions, and bodies we found... How can that be fake?”

Kaito shrugged and stood up, his long body popping from disuse that told Kokichi he had been flat against that wall for quite a while. And finally, Kaito came to him and sat down, knee bouncing anxiously as he observed their peers. “They wouldn’t say. They won’t talk to us at all, actually. Rantaro and Kaede have been here since the beginning, so I figured it out through them. Those screens...” He pointed to where Shuichi currently had his head in his hands and Junko Enoshima taunted him. “That’s what’s happening on the other side of this wall. The last class trial. What we did, it was the last murder.”

Kokichi should’ve felt relief, but he only felt empty. Confused. “You’re talking to me,” he said instead, “Don’t you hate me?” The environment was suddenly cold, a chill cast upon them as he spoke about things that should best be forgotten, especially when everything appeared to not *actually* have consequences (and why did that make him *more* upset?)

“I do. Mostly. But I think I understand everything now.”

“You do?”

“It was all so we could escape. Wasn’t it?”

A gross oversimplification. “Ugh... Don’t spare me with your optimism.”

“Seriously, kid! I’m not an idiot—” *Debatable*. “Yeah, you’re a jackass, stubborn, a piece of shit, useless at the best of times...”

“Wowie, I’m feeling butterflies! D’ya got feelings for me?!”

“S-Shut up!” Kaito griped, but his cheeks were stained pink. *Interesting*. Before Kokichi could mull over that piece of information more, Kaito continued, a firmness to his voice that was just like the Kaito he knew before. The headache was already forming. “I’m trying to cut you some slack, man! More than you deserve!”

“Insulting me is the best way to do that!”

“You didn’t even let me finish! Ya know what, nevermind, dunno why I

even *tried*.” Kaito crossed his arms, exhaling a big puff of air through his nose and bouncing his leg over his knee. His gaze softened as he looked at the TV screen, where a close-up of Shuichi’s face was featured as tears streamed down the detective’s face. His eyes were dead, hopeless. “C’mon, sidekick... Don’t give up now!”

Junko Enoshima was now turning into different people that he didn’t recognize. The talent of the Ultimate Cosplayer. The only consistent feature was the madness, much like that he’d come to expect from Junko Enoshima, swirling in her eyes and the manic grin spreading across her cheeks. But it wasn’t madness in the sense of despair; it was fanaticism, like the kind a groupie would have when watching their favorite band on stage.

“She doesn’t actually believe what she’s saying,” Kokichi mentioned off-handedly, fixated on the events of the last class trial just as Kaito was.

Kaito’s lips twitched into a frown, but his gaze didn’t break from his sidekick. “Hard to believe, I know... Tsumugi lost it.”

“No, idiot, look at her.”

“Stop callin’ me an idiot!”

Kokichi ignored him. “It’s like she’s just fulfilling a part. This Junko persona? It all being fiction? She’s acting out a fanfic, where she’s the self-insert.”

The other boy’s jaw dropped, and he looked at the girl closer, now dressed in a white wig and a green coat. Even as another character, her stance was defensive, like a frightened animal backed into a corner and ready to lash out at any given moment. “... How d’ya figure?”

“She said it was all fiction, everything, and she’s right. We’re alive. But the world must know that.” A camera blinked at the duo from the corner of the room. “They want to know our reactions, ‘post-death’. We were never planning to be killed. It’s just a faux-reality show. And Shuichi...” Kokichi nodded at the boy in the background as K1-B0 went head to head with the mastermind of the killing game, dull and decrepit. “He’s playing right into it.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Look at him!” Kokichi pointed loosely at the screen. “He’s crying because all hope is lost, right? And then after Kiibo finishes *whatever* he’s doing, Shuichi will be all rejuvenated and hopeful, which is *also* part of the script.”

“Haha... Hahaha!” Kaito laughed; it felt like Kokichi was being taunted. “You’re smart, I’ll give you that, but you’re real dumb when it comes to people.”



His face flushed an angry red. *Kaito* was mocking him? *Kaito*, the village idiot? What the hell did he know?! “What, because I don’t blindly trust people?!”

“You trusted me.”

Silence fell. “That was different.”

*Kaito* smirked. He didn’t like *Kaito* looking smug, it felt unnatural. “Was it?” He pointed a thumb behind him, at *Shuichi*. “I’ve been awake for a while. I *also* know that you left a will, and you trusted that to *Shuichi*.”

*Kokichi*’s face grew warm, and with a huff he hid it in his hands. “H-He’s a detective! And he’s fucking up right now, so—!”

*“I... I refuse. It’s because of hope that this whole thing is happening. I reject that hope!”*

*Shuichi*’s voice, loud and booming, echoed across the speakers. The chatter quieted, as all eyes fixated upon the screen and *Shuichi* *Saihara*, who, in the moments that seemed hopeless, refused both hope and despair.

*Kokichi*’s jaw dropped. *Kaito* smiled. “Never doubt my sidekick! He learned from the best!”

“He’s finding a third option.”

“Course! Because *Shuichi* always knows best!” *Kaito*’s smile froze, and was almost wistful; his eyes were bright and filled with something that *Kokichi* only truly saw in himself—something that he always ignored, because he knew it wouldn’t be reciprocated.

“Hah... You really do wear your heart on your sleeve. You like him, don’t you?”

*Kaito* did not try to deny it. He only nodded. “You do, too.”

Likewise, *Kokichi* stayed silent, pensive, because he knew that there was no way in hell he had a shot. “He hates me,” he said simply.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. He trusted you a lot. More than I ever did.” *Kaito* finally turned away from the screen, and his big palm landed upon *Kokichi*’s small knuckle. It was warm, if rough. “When you’re not trying to make everyone hate you, you can be pretty tolerable.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“C’mon, you know what I mean!” He gave *Kokichi*’s knuckle a firm squeeze, his eyes softening the same way they did when they looked at *Shuichi*. “In a few minutes, the class trial will be over and we’ll get to see *Shuichi* again. What will you do?”

Frowning, *Kokichi* tugged his hand away and folded them in his lap.

“Doesn’t even matter. *Shuichi* has the biggest, fattest crush on you. I’m chopped liver next to that.”

“Really?! You think so?”

“How stupid are you?! How did you figure out that I... when you can’t even... Whatever!” *Kokichi* folded his arms and leaned on his knees. *Kaito* was right. The class trial was about to end, given the lack of votes appearing on screen. They were ending *Danganronpa* for good, and soon *Shuichi* would see them all, alive—he didn’t even want to think of what his reaction would be to seeing *Kokichi* alive.

“By the way, it doesn’t matter if *Shuichi* likes me. He can like you, too,” *Kaito* said quietly, like a shared secret, as the walls surrounding them began to descend post-execution and the cameras shut off.

“K-Kaito?” *Shuichi*’s voice was loud, full of emotion, as the walls finally fell and *Himiko*, *Maki*, and *Shuichi* could see all of their fallen friends, crowded together in one space. “*Kaito*!” Pounding feet echoed upon the remains of the school. *Kokichi* couldn’t even look at him.

“*Shuichi*!” The astronaut jumped to his feet and left *Kokichi*, tackling the other boy in a hug. “Hell yeah! I knew you had it in you!”

“Are we... Are we dead?”

“Nope, alive and well. None of us died, *Shuichi*. We’re okay.”

“I... I don’t understand...” *Shuichi*’s voice was thick with tears, and he crumpled to his knees as *Kaito* fell with him. “How... I... What?”

“It’s alright. We’re here. We’re not leaving you again.” And *Shuichi* sobbed into *Kaito*’s chest, and the other man comforted him.

*Kokichi* didn’t belong at all. Who was he kidding?

So he stood up to leave, with no walls left to stop him, but his eyes lingered on every reunion, on every peer that he thought was dead not long ago, and lastly on *Kaito* and *Shuichi*. *Kaito* looked at him with newfound understanding.

*The first to understand.*

He didn’t want to run away anymore. And *Kaito* and *Shuichi*... They were right there.

*Kokichi* *Ouma* turned towards the boys and away from the empty stretch of nothingness, walking towards a new future.











# HERE TO STAY

Written by Kei

## WHEN

Shuichi, Kaito, and Kokichi had gotten out of the 53rd season of *Danganronpa*, none of them had places to stay. Like most things on this capitalist hellscape otherwise known as Earth, rent was exorbitantly high and they couldn't afford housing lest they want to go hungry and miserable for the rest of their lives. With those two things in mind, the three of them came up with the idea that they should get an apartment together, as if it were as easy as choosing what to have for dinner.

"After all," Kaito had reasoned, "We got to be friends on *Danganronpa*, right? Living in the same dorm. How different could it be?"

Although this was sound logic in Shuichi's mind, he couldn't shake the feeling that something disastrous was headed his way in the near future. Nonetheless, they all signed the lease for a studio apartment and told themselves they'd make it work.

It was difficult at first. Even after living together in a dorm, albeit a mostly fictional dorm for the sake of a reality TV series, it took Shuichi a bit to get used to coexisting in the same apartment with a significant lack of privacy. There were mornings where Shuichi would wake up with Kokichi's arm splayed over his face or Kaito's snores reverberating through the walls.

But somewhere along the way, their friendship had evolved into more than that, a liminal space walking the tightrope of not-quite romantic but not-quite platonic either until Shuichi had the guts to tell Kokichi and Kaito what he really wanted out of the relationship.

Living together had gone a lot better than Shuichi had expected, that's for sure, but that didn't mean that there weren't hiccups or situations that were less than ideal.

Like today.

Every now and then, Shuichi would come home to the sound of Kaito and Kokichi bickering. He'd be able to hear them before he could reach the door of their apartment, and every time, Shuichi would pray to deities he wasn't even sure he believed in just to make sure that they *weren't* going to be evicted.

This time is different, because not only can he hear the shouting and bickering coming from the apartment before he reaches the front door, Shuichi can also *smell smoke coming from their kitchen*. Worried, he sprints down the hall and hurriedly fishes for his keys from his backpack.

The moment he opens the door, he takes in the sight in front of him. Kokichi and Kaito, both wearing aprons as they go head to head. Kokichi's holding up a frying pan while Kaito holds his ground with a spatula. On the stove is a frying pan engulfed in flames. It's a miracle the fire alarm hasn't gone off yet.

Naturally, Shuichi starts to panic.

"Guys?!" Shuichi shouts, though Kokichi and Kaito don't seem to notice his presence.

Kokichi growls. "You're not a better cook than I am!"

"Well, I'm not the one who burnt an omelet, am I?!" Kaito yells back. "The one dish that even little kids would know how to cook and you somehow mess it up."

Ever the mature one, Kokichi only responds by blowing a raspberry.

"Oh, how *classy*, you little piece of—"

Before the argument can escalate any further, Shuichi blows a whistle, startling both of them. They drop their respective cookware and hold their hands up in defense.

"You're... you're home early," Kaito says carefully.

Shuichi chooses to ignore that. "What the hell happened here?!" he all but shouts.

Kaito and Kokichi point at each other. "*It was his fault!*"

"That doesn't explain what exactly happened here," Shuichi deadpans. "Maybe we should put *that*—" He gestures to the fire on the stove "—out first."

"Fine," Kokichi says with a grumble, and without thinking about it, he pours water over the fire only for the flames to grow.

Kaito screams. "That's a grease fire, dumbass! You're not supposed to put water over a grease fire!"

Before Kokichi can answer back, Kaito shoves him out of the way and reaches for the pan's lid sitting on one of the counters and rushes to contain the fire.

It takes a little bit, but the fire goes down eventually, and once it does, the three of them start cleaning up before they sit at the dining table to have a *lovely* chat about their fight in the kitchen.



“Didn’t I tell you *not* to argue in the kitchen?” Shuichi asks, as if he’s scolding elementary school students and not two fully-grown men. Well. It’s debatable if Kokichi is considered full-grown, though that is beside the point.

“Yes...”

“We just wanted to surprise you, Saihara-chan! We haven’t had dinner together in a while so we wanted it to be special,” Kokichi explains. “But then Momota-chan ruined it!”

“You’re the one who started kissing me when I got home!”

“You started kissing back!”

The bickering starts all over again, and the panic starts to sink into Shuichi’s skin once more as he thinks of how to regain control of this conversation.

Shuichi settles for blowing another whistle, which promptly gets them to shut up and focus their attention on him.

“Guys,” Shuichi starts, “While I appreciate the effort that you went through to cook for me, I really *don’t* want another kitchen fire. One was more than enough. *Two* is just absurd. God forbid we somehow end up with *three* kitchen fires. Sound good?”

Both Kaito and Kokichi nod in agreement, and a slight grin appears over Shuichi’s face.

“Great. Now that that’s settled, let’s go pick something up at the grocery store since our dinner has been singed. We’re due for a grocery trip anyway.”

Bringing Kokichi and Kaito along with him to the grocery store only leads to regret for Shuichi. He’s already tense with the near-destruction of their kitchen, he doesn’t need to add a potential ban from the local grocery store to his list.

Thing is, even if the trio *did* happen to get banned from the grocery store, this wouldn’t be the first time they’ve pulled that off.

It was the summer before when they’d gotten banned from the convenience store across the street from their apartment complex, shortly after they’d moved in together. Kaito had accidentally elbowed a display of sports drinks while goofing around with Kokichi, leading them to roll across the floor and injuring two employees and three customers in the process. Despite Shuichi’s attempts at talking to the manager and telling her, “*no*, it was an accident, my friends did not mean to knock that display down,” the manager did not budge and consequently, banned them for life. Sometimes, when Shuichi drives by said grocery store, he can see his, Kokichi’s, and Kaito’s faces displayed near the entrance as if they were mugshots.

Regardless, he really, *really*, doesn’t want that happening all over again, especially after the day they’ve had.

Shuichi put Kokichi in charge of the shopping cart so that he and Kaito wouldn’t give each other piggyback rides in the store. It had not occurred to Shuichi that leaving Kokichi in charge of anything, let alone a shopping cart, would lead to potential disaster.

For starters, Kokichi keeps putting useless items in the basket instead of sticking to the shopping list that Shuichi had carefully prepared. Kokichi also seems interested in pushing the cart around at lightning speeds, and Kaito almost grabs a shopping cart of his own to race with him.

At this rate, it feels like Shuichi is going to pop a blood vessel trying to keep things in order.

In the end, they make it out of the grocery store alive, albeit with about two extra chip bags that were not originally accounted for. He has a sneaking suspicion that Kokichi added them back to the cart when Shuichi wasn’t looking, though he can’t really bring himself to *mind* all that much considering they’re his favorite chips.

Shuichi handles dinner when they get back to the apartment, and the three of them have a wonderful meal together before they cuddle to watch a film before heading to bed for the night. It’s Kokichi who falls asleep first, like he always does when Shuichi runs his hands through Kokichi’s hair.

It’s moments like these that Shuichi wouldn’t trade either of them for the world, even if they are a pain in the ass sometimes. They’re *his* boyfriends. He’s reminded of this every day when he comes home to them, shenanigans and all.

They’re headed to the laundromat a few days later to get their laundry done after weeks of procrastination. As usual, Kokichi scampers away while Kaito loads the clothes into the machine and Shuichi’s off exchanging his dollar bills for quarters. Even so, Shuichi can feel his heart swell at having Kaito and Kokichi around for even the most mundane of tasks.

As the washing machine continues to cycle through their clothes, Kaito turns to Shuichi.

“Dance with me,” he says out of the blue.

Shuichi gives him a look. “There’s no music.”

“Yeah, but I still wanna dance with you.” Kaito holds his hand out for Shuichi to take, and reluctantly, Shuichi takes it, letting Kaito lead him.

The only sound surrounding them is the hum of the washing machine, but Shuichi can’t deny that slow dancing with Kaito is nice. He leans into



Kaito's touch, resting his head against Kaito's chest and listening to the faint *thump, thump, thump* of his heartbeat.

Though, their peacefulness is interrupted only moments later when Shuichi gets startled by a loud snore coming from the laundry basket. Kaito uncovers the bedsheet to find Kokichi taking a nap—a common occurrence during their trips to the laundromat.

Shuichi only laughs softly and pulls his phone out to take a picture.

“Don’t ya have a ton of those on your phone already?”

Shuichi hums. “Yeah, but he looks cute, so.”

By the time they get back from the laundromat, it’s late evening, though none of them really want to go to bed just yet. Kokichi opts to put on a TV show that they’d been meaning to watch together while Shuichi pops the popcorn in the microwave.

“Hurry up, you’re gonna miss the beginning!” Kaito says, turning his head toward the kitchen.

Kokichi laughs. “I can pause it, silly Momota-chan.”

A soft chuckle escapes from Shuichi’s lips and he thinks, *yeah, rooming with these two was the best decision I’ve ever made.*

















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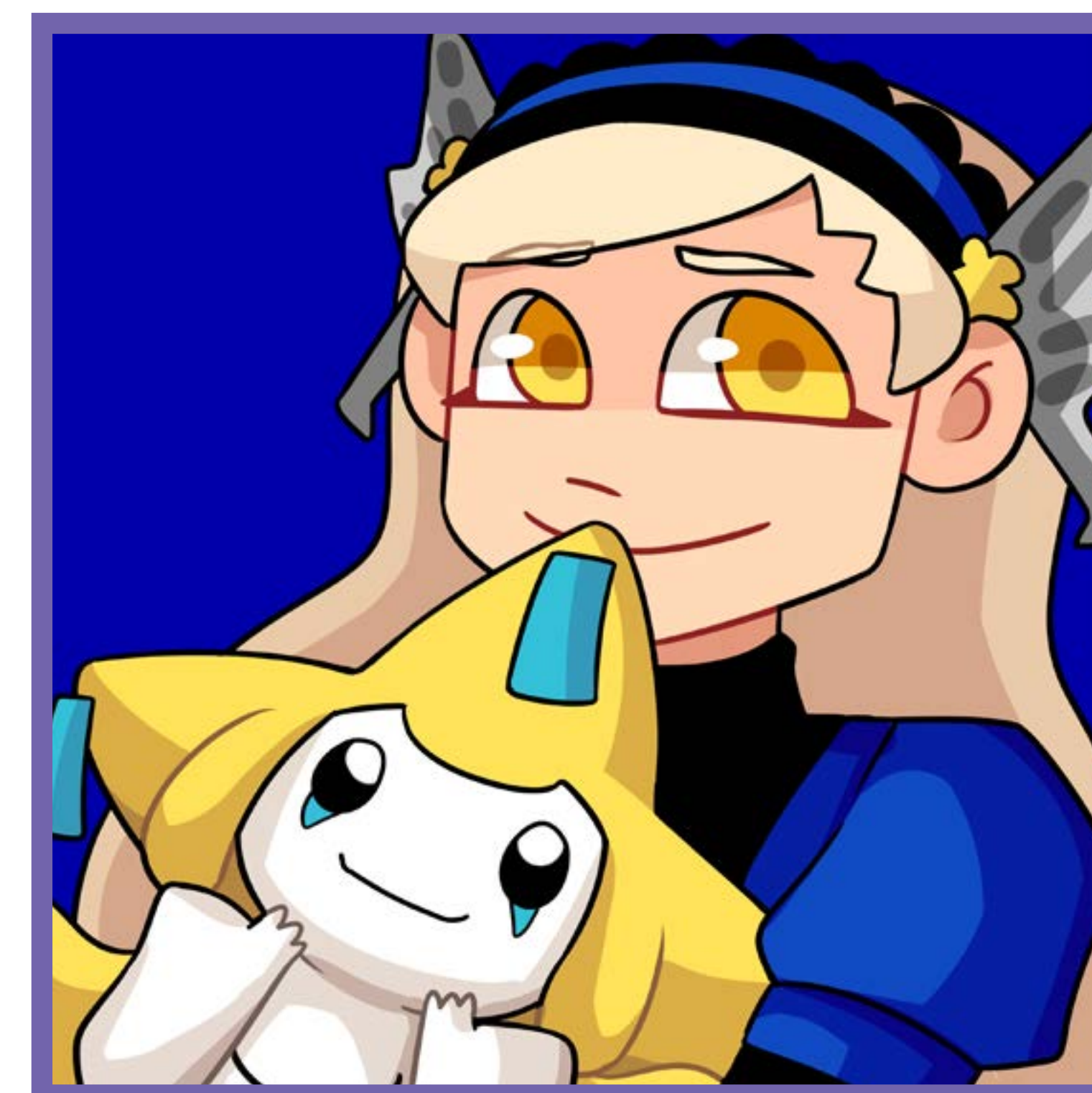
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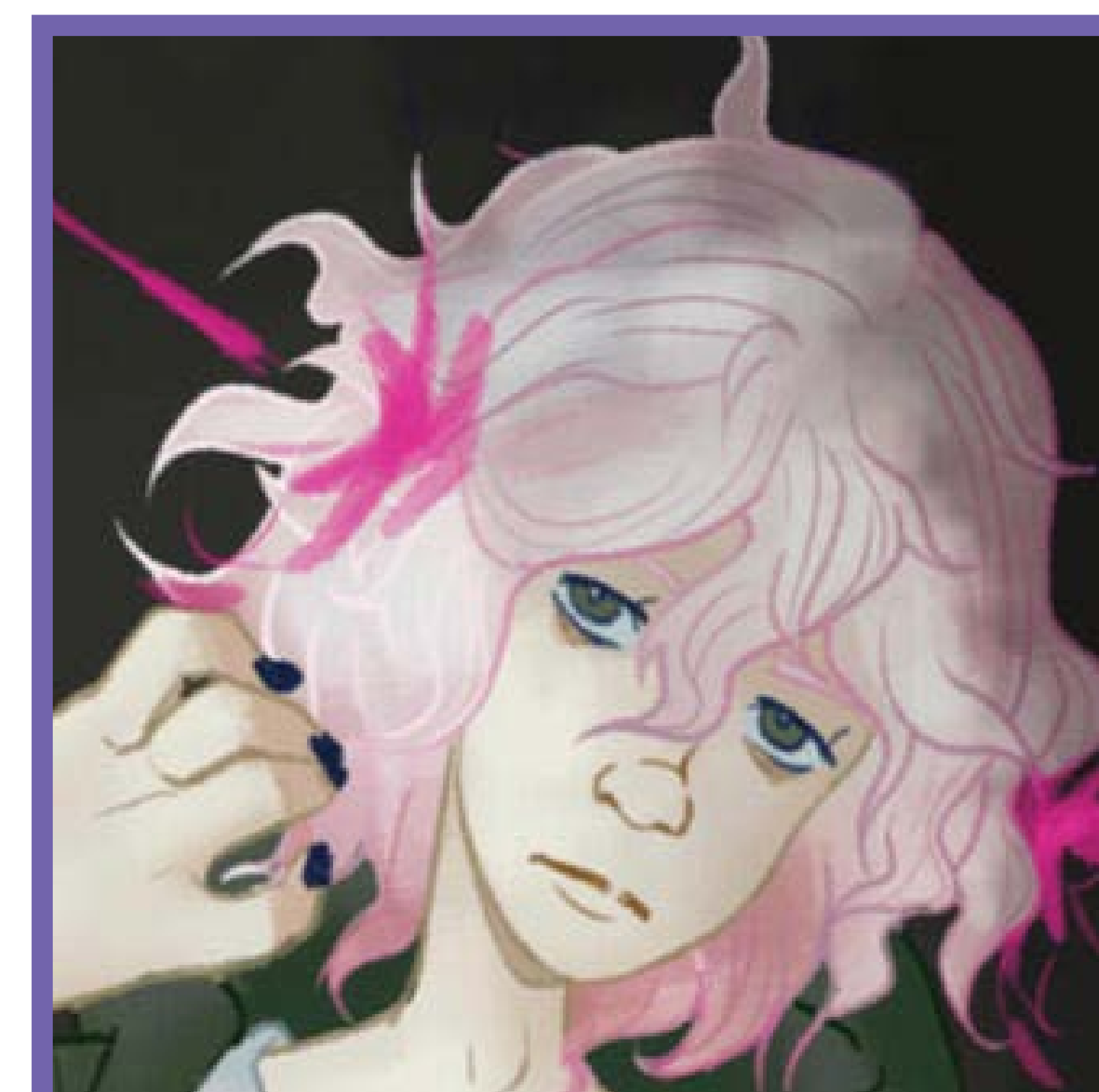
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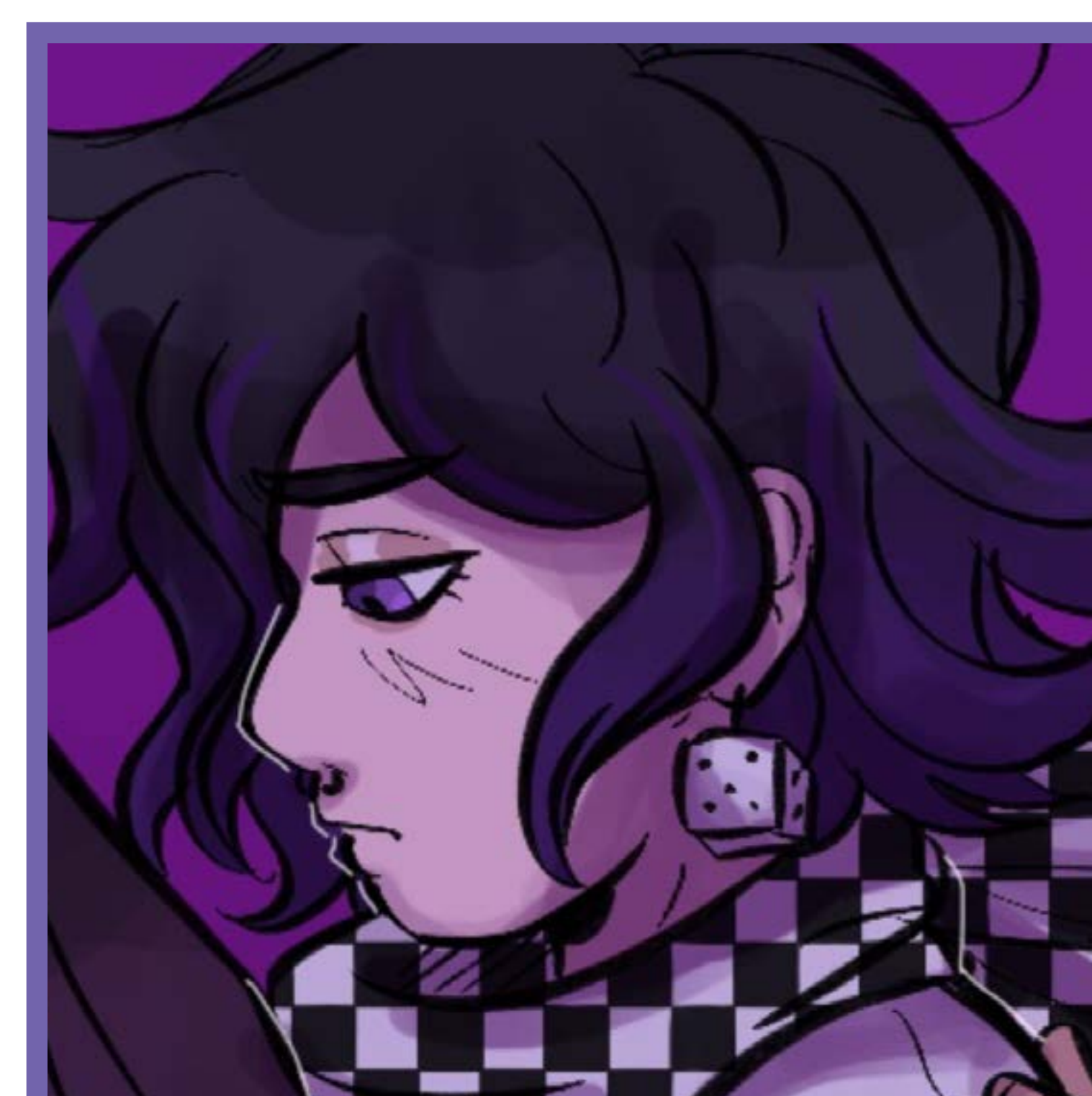
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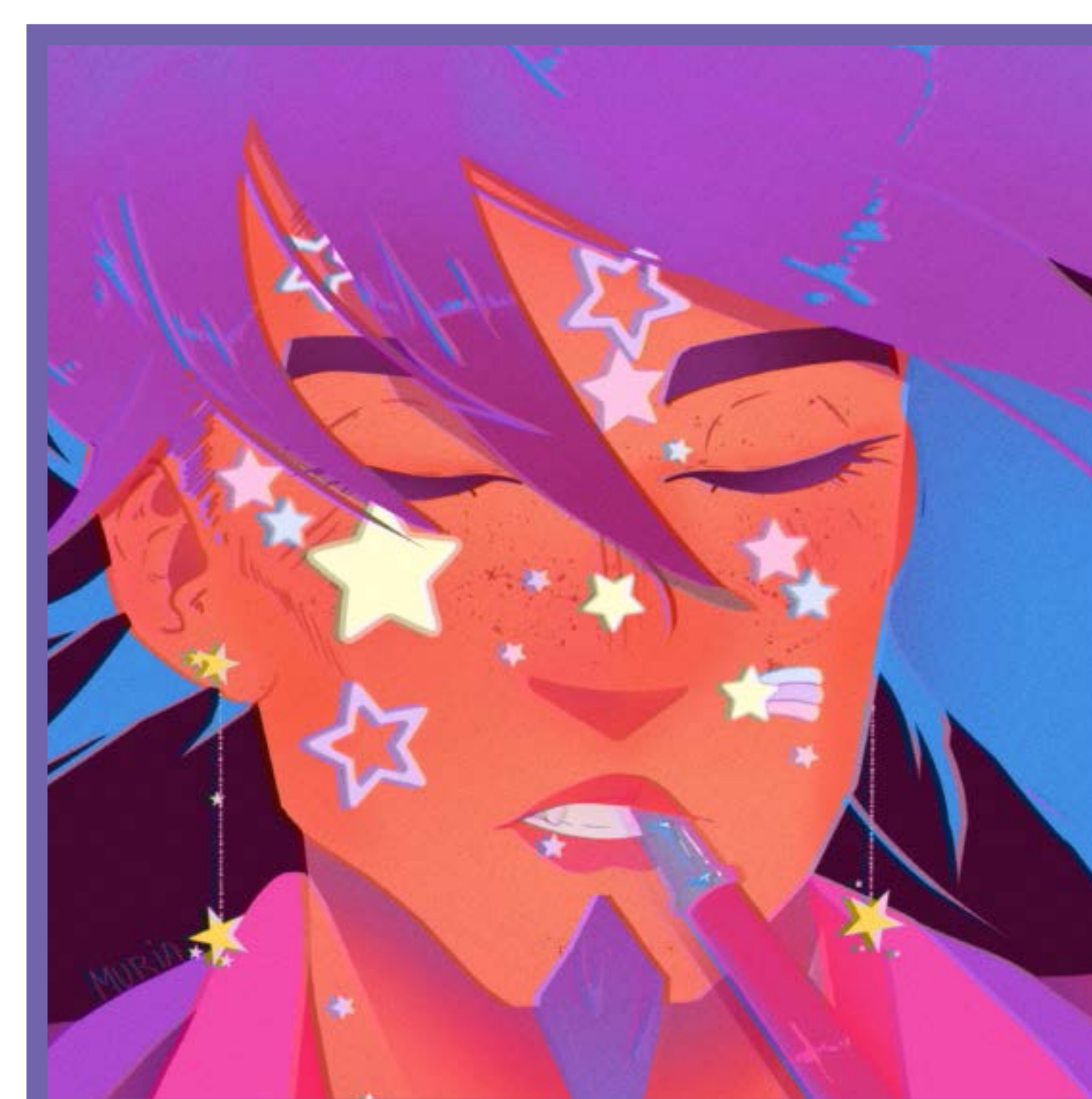
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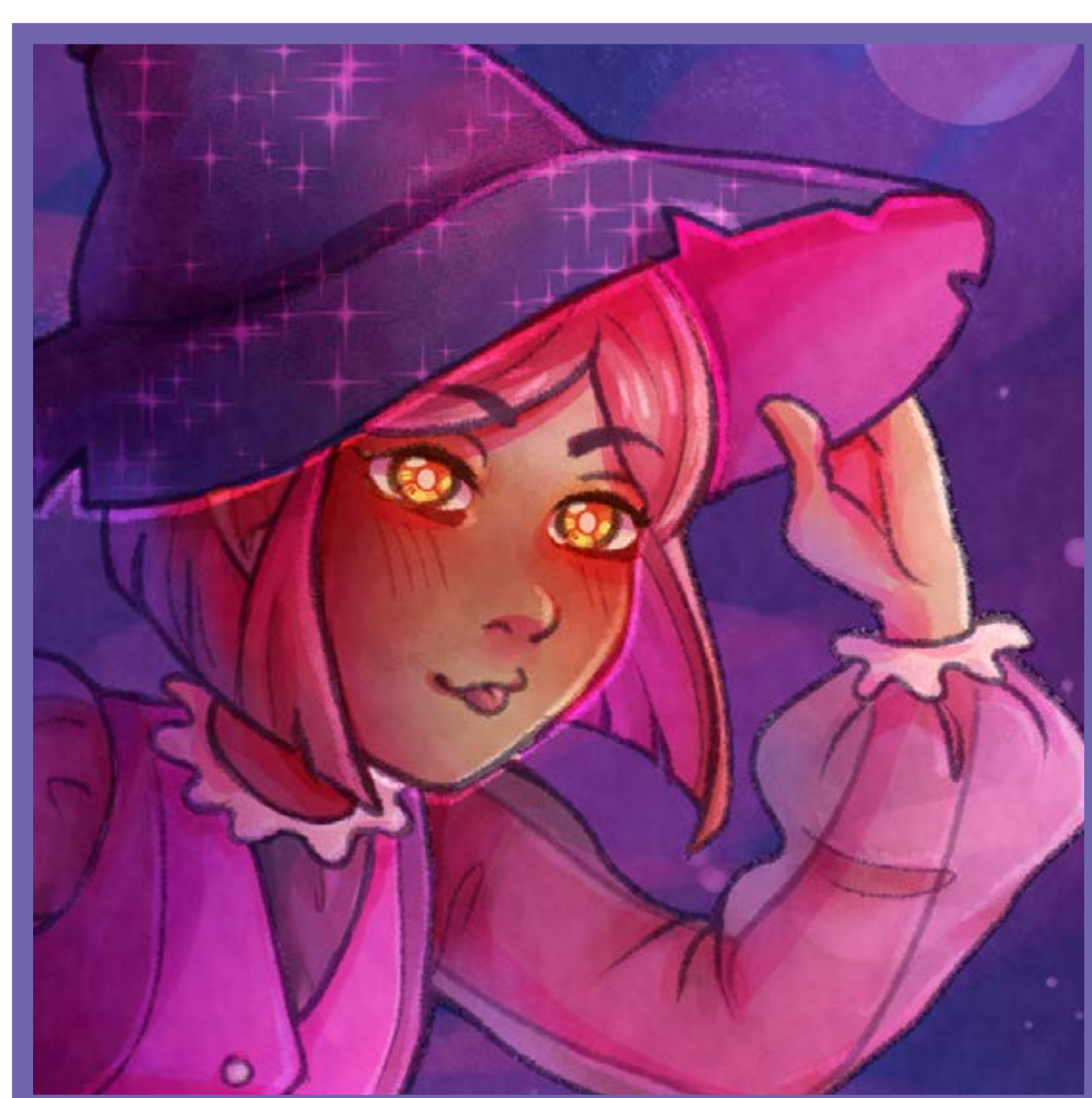
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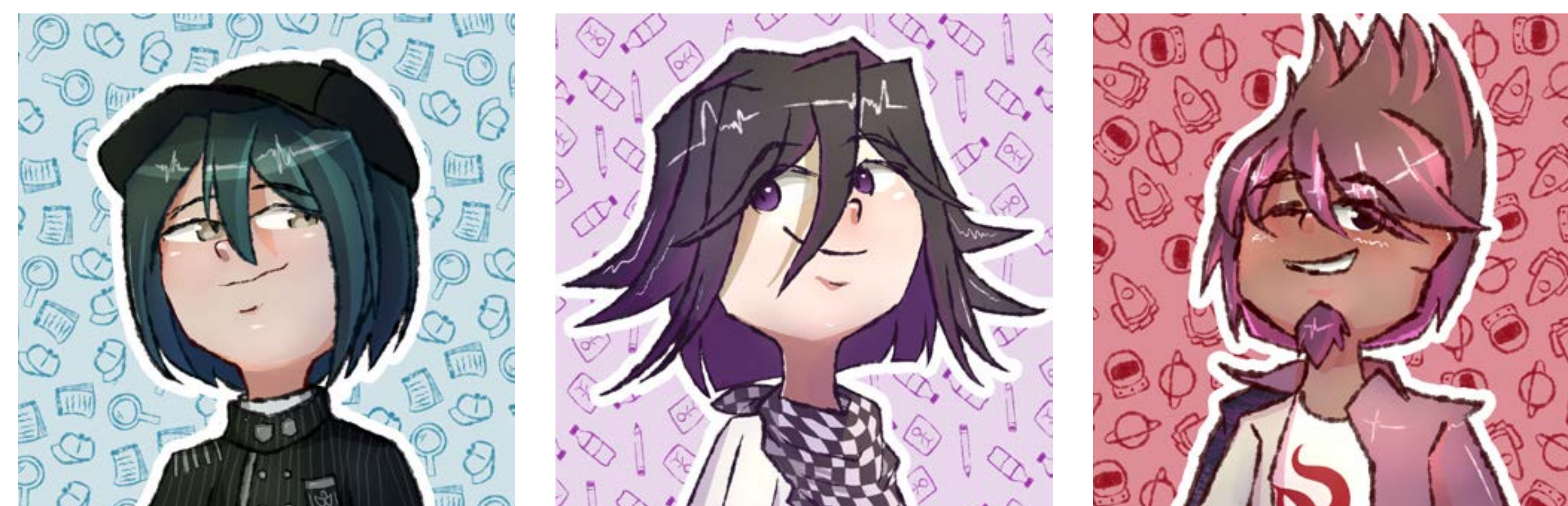
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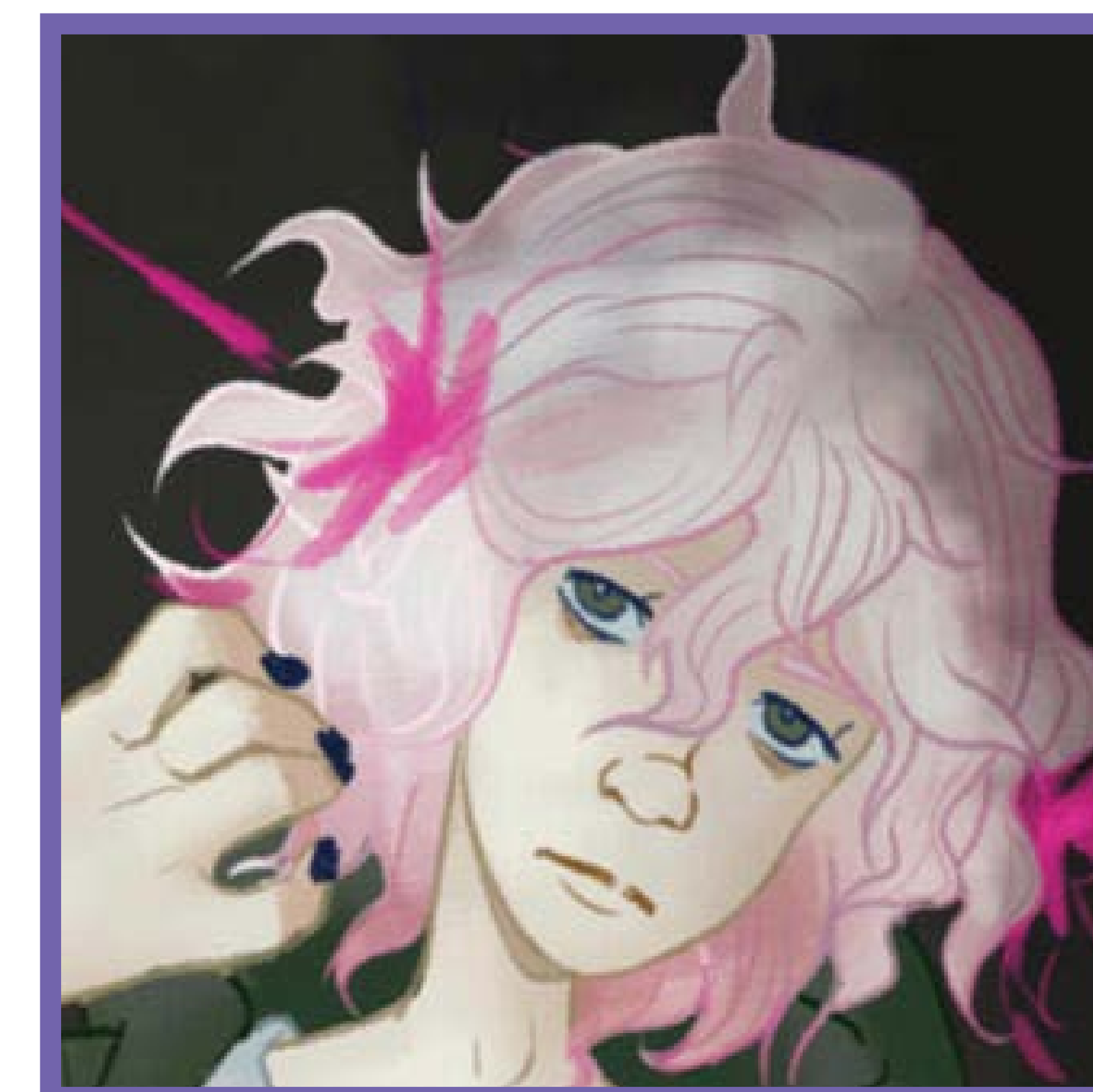
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